

## **E-mail advertising: A Middle Eastern perspective and the moderating role of gender**

### **ABSTRACT**

This study assesses Middle Eastern consumers' beliefs regarding attitude and behavioural responses toward e-mail advertising. To date, little is known about Middle Eastern consumers' attitudes and behavioural responses towards email advertising. Our findings show that gender moderates the relationship between beliefs and attitudes, and responses to email advertising. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 1200 respondents and yielded 321 valid responses. The hypothesized model was tested using structural equation modelling. Our findings show that both informativeness and entertainment beliefs positively predicted Middle Eastern consumers' attitudes toward e-mail advertising. Additionally, attitude was found to fully mediate the relationship between beliefs regarding and behavioural responses toward e-mail advertising. Notably, females were found to react more intensely when exposed to email ads. Our findings suggest that advertisers promoting in a Middle Eastern context should take further steps to enhance the quality of information and the perceived entertainment value that could be delivered to Middle Eastern consumers through e-mail advertising specially for female internet users.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Advertising has long been regarded and adopted by firms as an effective promotional tool that is used in communicating with consumers through a variety of media. As technology has improved, the advertising industry is adopting and developing new media that can offer higher levels of interactivity and personalization with consumers. Zhou and Bao (2002) refer to interactivity as a unique characteristic that differentiates the internet, as an advertising medium, from traditional advertising media. One such medium is e-mail. Conceptualizations of email as an advertising medium centre around the idea of sending advertising messages to internet users with email accounts (Rubel, 2010), either targeting specific account holders or via mass messaging (Gobal, Walter and Tripathi, 2001). According to Forrester Research, the average household receives nine email marketing messages each day (Priore, 2000). Email advertising is seen as both time and cost effective (Haq, 2009). As such, Chang, Rizal and Amin (2013) regard email advertising as the most successful form communication technology. Like other regions all over the world, industries, including advertising, are increasingly moving towards digital with expectations regarding internet advertising as the most blistering growing advertising format through to 2019 in Middle East (Gulf Marketing Review, 2017).

Whilst information technology and its application to marketing communication has been widely studied, most extant studies in this field were conducted in western settings with developed telecommunication infrastructures (Baliamoune-Lutz, 2003). Little research has been conducted outside developed countries about internet users' attitudes and behavioural responses to email advertising (Azeem and Haq, 2012). This is surprising given the rapid expansion of computer and

internet use in developing countries (Chinn and Fairlie, 2006). To address this knowledge gap, and to advance the existing body of knowledge in this domain, our study investigates email advertising effectiveness in a Middle Eastern context, that is, the relationships among beliefs,

attitudes, and behavioural responses toward e-mail advertising. Our inquiry aims to determine how Middle Eastern internet users evaluate those relationships and whether internet user's gender moderates the hypothesized path. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to address the gender role as a moderator of the path depicting the effectiveness of email advertising model, i.e., from beliefs to behavioural responses via attitudes.

## **Literature Review and Hypothesis Development**

### *Beliefs about Email Advertising*

Wyer and Albarracin (2005) define beliefs as predictions people hold about the possibility that their knowledge regarding a referent is true. Mahmoud (2013) posits that beliefs regarding online advertising can be defined as all knowledge that consumers consider as factual for e-mail advertising. Consequently, such beliefs can provide a good source of product information (Ju-Pak, 1999) or a false source of information (Nadilo, 1998), or simply as a source of irritation for the email recipient (Ducoffe, 1996).

Beliefs regarding consumers' attitudes towards email advertising have been addressed from multiple perspectives. For instance, using cosmetics brands as the focal product, Martin et al. (2003) found that consumers, if influenced positively by the email advertising, were more likely to visit a physical store to purchase the product rather than visit the brand's online website to obtain further information.

### *Attitudes towards Email Advertising*

There have been multiple conceptualizations of consumers' attitudes in the marketing literature, mostly focusing on how this construct is measured (Batra and Ahtola, 1991), its application to the purchase and consumption of services (Howcroft, Hamilton, and Hewer, 2002), and goods (Kim, et al. 2012). In definitional terms, Eagly and Chaiken (1993:1) provided what may be the most conventional contemporary definition of attitudes, specifically, an *"attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of*

*favor or disfavor*", whilst Bem (1970:14) defines attitudes as "likes and dislikes". Based on Bem's (1970) definition of attitude, we can conceptualize consumers' attitudes toward e-mail advertising as the extent to which consumers like or dislike e-mail advertising.

### *Behavioural Responses toward Email Advertising*

Behavioural responses toward advertising are prompted actions that consumers take after exposure to an advertisement (Mahmoud, 2013). Such behaviours could be actioned through seeking further information after exposure to the advertisement (Nedungadi, Mitchell, & Berger, 1993). In the case of e-mail advertising, we adopt two main behavioural responses, which can be operationally defined as "reading the advertising" and/or "reporting it as spam" (Morimoto and Chang, 2006). This study addresses the dearth of research to date of consumers' behavioral responses to email advertising.

### *Gender Differences and E-Mail Advertising*

Fundamental differences exist in the way men and women use the internet, with research suggesting fewer women use the internet (Kehoe, Pitkow, and Morton, 1997), owing to gender differences in lifestyle and time availability (DeBare, 1996). Not surprisingly then, research suggests that men are more likely than women to use online services such as email to purchase products online (Shavitt, Lowrey, and Haeffner, 1998; Van Slyke, Comunale, and Belanger, 2002). This is despite the fact that women found email more useful than men when communicating

(DeBrand and Johnson, 2008). This study attempts to further our understanding of the role gender plays in email advertising,

### **The Conceptual Model and Hypotheses**

Academic interest and early conceptualizations of attitudes towards advertising date back to the 1960s when Lavidge and Steiner (1961) posited that consumers process advertising as a sequence of events starting with *cognition* then onto *affect* and *finally* conation. Palda (1966) labeled this sequence as the hierarchy of effects. Later, Bauer and Greyser (1968) studied attitudes towards advertising and found that consumers discriminated between two clusters, namely, *social effects* and *economic effects*. Later studies have confirmed the significant role that beliefs about advertising play in predicting consumers' attitudes toward internet-mediated

advertising (op. cit. Kamal & Chu, 2012; Li-Ming, et al. 2013; Mahmoud, 2013; Saadeghvaziri, Dehdashti, & Kheyrikhah, 2013; Zabadi, Shura, & Elsayed, 2012). Based on the aforementioned studies, we posit:

H1: Middle Eastern consumers' beliefs about e-mail advertising will significantly be related to their attitudes toward it.

The relationship between attitudes and behavioural responses toward internet media advertising has received considerable scholarly attention. The findings indicate that positive attitudes are accompanied by favourable behavioural responses to towards advertising (Mahmoud, 2013; Saadeghvaziri, Dehdashti, & Kheyrikhah, 2013; Wang and Sun, 2010a). We therefore posit:

H2: Middle Eastern consumers' attitudes toward e-mail advertising mediates the relationship between beliefs about email advertising and behavioural responses toward such advertising.

Consumers' differences regarding gender have always been an interest to marketers (Cho & Jialin, 2008). Understanding the variance between males and females regarding their beliefs about and attitudes towards advertising, will allow marketers to target consumers efficiently (Wolin & Korgaonkar, 2005). For example, Darley & Smith (1995) indicated that males differ from females in processing the promotional messages delivered by advertising. We therefore hypothesize,



H3: The path from beliefs to behaviour via attitude will be moderated by gender.

## **Methodology**

### *Sample*

We received 321 valid responses that were used in our statistical analyses, via an online survey sent to randomly selected email users in the Middle East. We approached our respondents personally. Our e-mail message asked the targeted subjects to respond to our questionnaire. Data were collected between February 2012 and April 2016.

### *Measures*

Measures of the study were validated regarding the Middle Eastern Arab culture (see Table 1). Scale items were translated from English to Arabic and back-translated to English to improve translation accuracy in accordance with Sun and Wang (2010). Academics from Damascus University were asked to evaluate the wording for the scale items to guarantee that measures were face validated.

### *Respondents*

Table 4 illustrates the demographic profile of the respondents in our study. The respondents in most cases held a Bachelor's degree with an age range of 20-29 years. The questionnaire was pilot tested among 42 internet users to ensure an understanding and acceptance by our respondents in line with recommendations from Tharenou, Donohue, and Cooper (2007).

We assessed our measures for factorial validity using confirmatory factor analysis as shown in Figure 1. Our confirmatory factor analysis was rejected and was subjected to re-specification using exploratory factor analysis (Meyers, Gamst, & Guarino, 2017). Table 2 illustrates how the measures were factor analyzed using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation checks for the dimensionality of the scales measuring beliefs and attitudes. Finally, measures were assessed for reliability using Cronbach alpha co-efficient to check for their internal consistency (see Table 3). As a result, belief regarding e-mail advertising in the Middle Eastern context was a 2-factor model instead of what was presumed in the confirmatory factor analysis model.

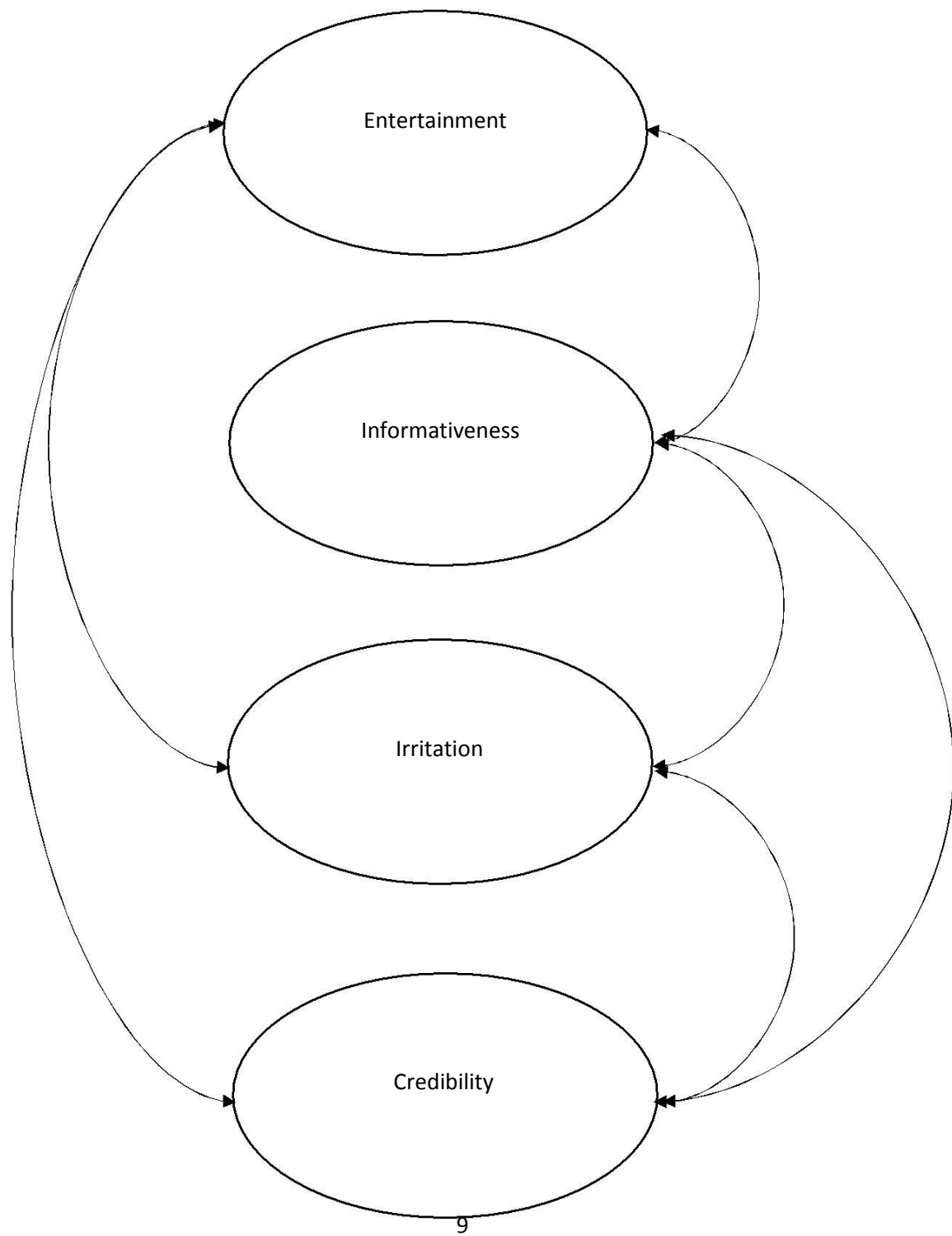
**TABLE 1**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Source</b>
Entertainment	I enjoy receiving email advertisement	Wolin et al., 2002; Ducoffe, 1996
	I feel pleased when I received email advertisements	
	It is fun to receive email advertisements	
Information	Good source of information	Ducoffe, 1996
	Timely, delivers product-related information	
	Email advertising provides information I really need	
Irritation	Irritating	Ducoffe, 1996
	Confusing	
	I receive too many emails	
Credibility	Annoying	Wang & Sun, 2010a, 2010b; Wolin et al., 2002
	Helps me make purchase decisions	
	I trust email advertised products	
Attitude	I believe what email advertisements claim	Wolin et al., 2002; Wang & Sun, 2010a, 2010b
	Overall, I like email advertisements	
	Overall, email advertising is important	
Behavioural Responses	Overall, email advertising is good	Designed for the
	How to you react to email advertisements?	

(Reading the advertisement.) How do you react to email advertisements? (Reporting advertisements as SPAM)	study
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Measures used in the study

**FIGURE 1** Beliefs regarding email advertising measurement model



**TABLE 2:** Exploratory Factor Analysis results

Rotated Component Matrix				
Item	Component			
	Irritation	Informativeness	Attitude	Behavior
I enjoy receiving email advertisements*	0.837			
It is fun to receive email advertisements*	0.712			
Irritating	0.901			
Annoying	0.881			
Confusing	0.63			
Good source of information		0.459		
Timely – delivers product-related information		0.751		
Email advertising provides information I really need		0.715		
Helps me make good purchase decisions		0.869		
I trust email advertised products		0.788		
Overall, I like email advertisements			0.909	
Overall, email advertising is important			0.944	
Overall, email advertising is good			0.948	
Reading the advertisement				0.891
Not reporting email ads as spam				0.889
Eigenvalue	3.603	2.974	2.616	1.585
% Variance	36.026	29.744	87.211	79.241

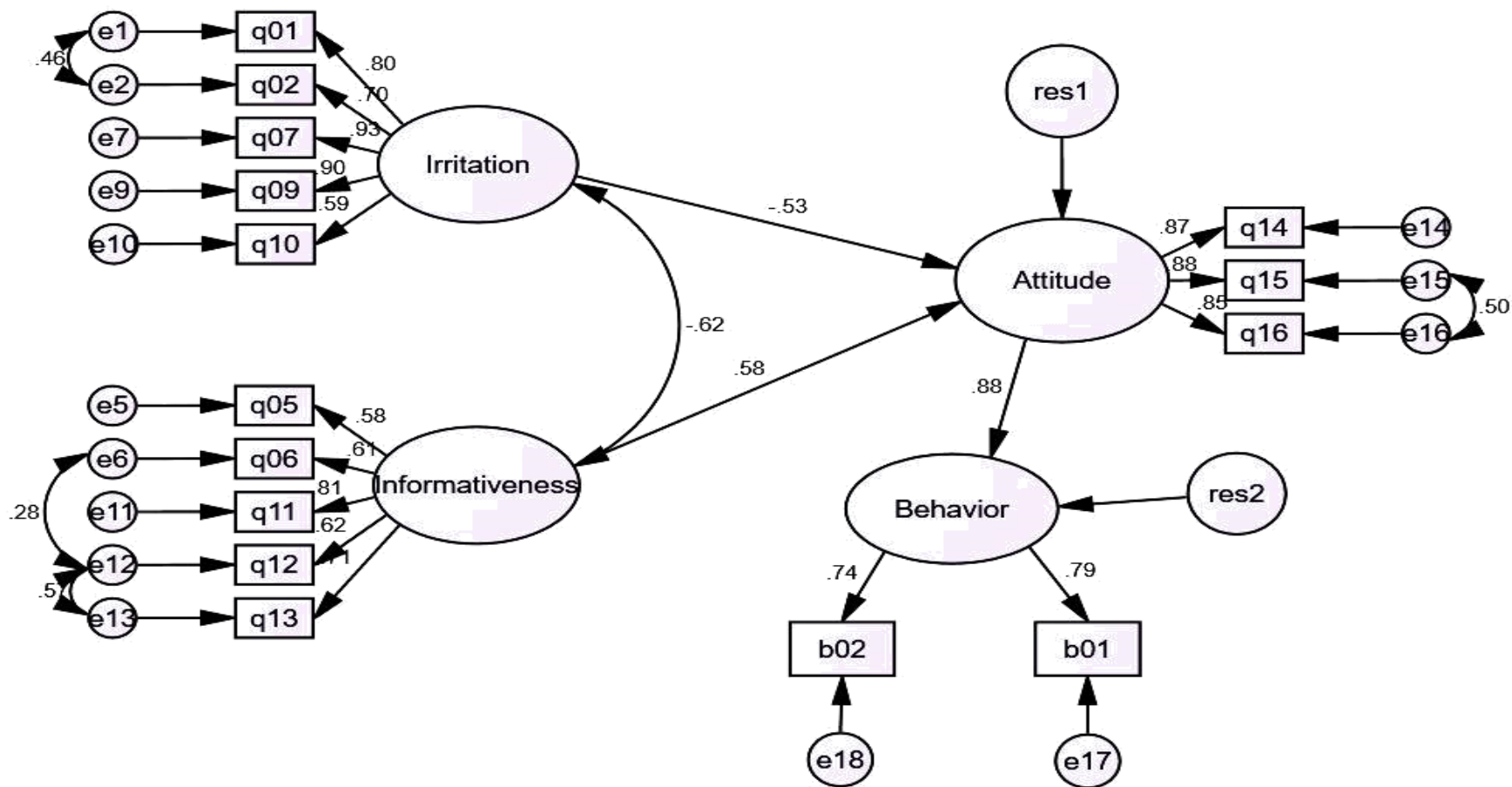
\* Reverse-scored

## Results

Our results show that respondents hold negative beliefs and attitudes regarding email advertising which they view as being irritating and not informative. Further, the respondents consider email advertising as untrustworthy, annoying, and free of entertainment. Further, the respondents seldom read email advertisements (see Table 5).

The path from beliefs to behaviour via attitude was found to be significant and the fitting metrics show a good fit for our data. Thus, we found support for H2. Moreover, gender is found

to moderate the path from attitude to behaviour, specifically, females' behaviour to email advertising is more affected by attitude ( $\beta = 0.951$ ) than males' ( $\beta = 0.817$ ). We conclude that H3 is partially supported.



**TABLE 3**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>No of Items</b>	<b>Alpha Coefficient</b>
Irritation	5	0.880
Informativeness	5	0.861
Attitude	3	0.927
Behaviour	2	*0.736

Reliability Test

**TABLE 4**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Values</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>% Frequency</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
Gender	Males	196	61.10		
	Females	125	38.90		
	Total	321	100		
Education	Primary or High School	6	1.9		
	Intermediate Diploma/College	62	19.3		
	Bachelor Degree	58	18.1		
	Postgraduate	195	60.7		
	Total	321	100		
Age	<20 years	7	2.20	18 years	56 years
	20-29 years	242	75.4		
	30-39 years	35	10.9		
	>40 years	37	11.5		
	Total	321	100		

Respondents' Demographic Profile

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\* Spearman-Brown Coefficient



**TABLE 5**

	<b>One-Sample Test</b>					
	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Irritation	5.191	320	.000	.29907	.1857	.4124
-						
Informativeness	15.221	320	.000	-.69720	-.7873	-.6071
Attitude	-7.338	320	.000	-.44029	-.5583	-.3222
-						
Behaviour	21.122	320	.000	-1.36760	-1.4950	-1.2402

## Discussion

The key finding of our research is Middle Eastern consumers' beliefs about email advertising significantly predicted their attitudes towards it. Specifically, email advertising that is both entertaining and informative had a positive influence in respondents' attitudes towards this form of advertising, implying that Middle Eastern consumers wanted email advertisements that were timely and delivered content relevant information. The findings have significant implications for organizations using email advertising to communicate their value proposition. Inherent in the findings of this study, is the need for marketing organizations to design and develop email advertisements that demonstrate deft editing, the use of colourful visuals, and contain entertainment value relevant to the intended target audience. These finds are in line with

previous studies, most notably Usman, Ilyas and Uhssain (2010), Eze and Lee (2012), and Kamal and Chu (2012).

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